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ABSTRACT

The Dow Jones Newspaper Fund Intensive Journalistic Writing Institute, a 2-week summer workshop for Ohio high school teachers of journalism conducted in June 1991, demonstrated that the team of journalistic writing techniques and current composition pedagogy is unbeatable in fostering critical reading and writing skills. The institute focused on the concepts of audience, focus, form, and authority base to "redefine" journalism so that it would fit more comfortably into an English class and still be called "journalism." The workshop syllabus was grounded on six assumptions: (1) journalism teachers need to write; (2) the methods of teaching journalistic concepts are as important as the concepts themselves; (3) combining composition and journalism theory and pedagogy improves critical reading and writing skills; (4) the concept of intensive journalistic writing can work in stand-alone courses or in literature courses; (5) much can be accomplished by incorporating journalistic writing skills into literature and writing courses; and (6) new ideas will be produced as participants and coordinators of the institute work together. Months after the conclusion of the institute, the coordinators were still receiving revisions of revisions of course syllabi from participants of the workshop. (RS)

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Paper Presented at the Annual NCTE Conference

Seattle, WA, November 1991

Pedagogy in the Teaching of Journalistic Writing

Over the past twenty-five years, journalism has been called upon to achieve a variety of goals in secondary schools: to put together magazines using stories from the students' own communities, to explore careers, to construct creative coverage of classes and class members in school yearbooks, to improve feature writing and news reporting, to use advertising effectively, to involve students in the learning experience, to teach skills like interviewing, doing layouts and makeups, and editing. But the workshop I will describe here demonstrated that the team of journalistic writing techniques and current composition pedagogy is unbeatable in fostering critical reading and writing skills.

In June 1991, a two-week summer workshop for Ohio high school teachers of journalism was sponsored by The Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, The Scripps School of Journalism, and the Department of English at Ohio University. The Dow Jones Newspaper Fund Intensive Journalistic Writing Institute (hereafter referred to as Institute) was conducted by Professor Patricia Westfall of Scripps and me, the director of the writing program at OU.

As Patricia explains in her handout, our goal was to "'redefine' journalism so that it would fit more comfortably into an English class and still be 'journalism.'" To help participants make that transition, we focused on these concepts described in Patricia's handout:

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AUDIENCE: This is defined not as "the reader," but as "many readers" or "mass audience." Students must learn to react not by whether they personally like something, but by whether the intended audience would like it. This means first learning to discern what the intended audience is. Two key words for observing audience are "demographics," the characteristics of a population (age, sex, marital status, income, etc.), and "psychographics," or the attitudes and values of a population.

FOCUS: All nonfiction (like fiction) has a "theme," but the scope and presentation of themes are affected by audience and medium. A how-to magazine usually puts the focus in very simple language (cake baking is easy"). A literary magazine may be more subtle ("eggs bind cakes; cakes bind families"). A magazine may bury the focus eight paragraphs into a story, a newspaper article will lead with it, and a television story will close with it. Medium, not meaning, determines placement and complexity of the focus to some extent. Students need to observe these influences on nonfiction themes.

FORM: There are "genres" in nonfiction, but they are not formally defined. Rather than catalog them (there are hundreds), [we must] try to see the ideas that shape form. One idea is "author's purpose" (to inform, entertain, persuade, describe, compare, etc.). Another common way to think of nonfiction forms is by subject matter (the sports article, the business article, the science article). A third idea is to use structure to define form (the classic beginning-middle-end, the photo essay, the recipe, the short, the sidebar). Effect (intended effect on readers) can also describe form (to make them laugh, to move them to action, to change their thinking). This last is obviously similar to form defined by "purpose" except that

perception focuses on the reader intead of on the writer.

AUTHORITY BASE: Nonfiction must sound true (as well as be true) so many cues reassuring the reader must pepper the text. For example: S/he said; many psychologists argue; according to Dr. Marilyn Jones, a paleontologist from; I know because I; you will feel like a new person when. There are hundreds of phrases in any story that signal a reporter is at work to gather facts, not make them up. Students need to learn to read for these cues; not all are legitimate. (Most psychologists? Cite the survey.)

These journalistic concepts--which are, of course, familiar to us English teachers--entail critical thinking. Dealing with audience, for instance, requires students to gather and sort through a great deal of information to analyze their intended audience. Studying focus in essays, for example, requires reading critically to determine how the theme, its scope, and its presentation are affected by the intended audience and medium. Examining a piece of writing to determine which element controls the shape of the piece fosters critical thinking. Finally, to improve critical thinking skills, English teachers have for decades asked students to evaluate the credibility of sources in newspapers, essays, editorials, etc.

In addition to emphasizing those journalistic concepts, the workshop syllabus was grounded in these assumptions: (1) Teachers of journalism--like all teachers of language arts--need to write. (2) The <u>methods</u> of teaching journalistic concepts are as important as the concepts themselves. The best way to change classroom attitudes and behaviors--of both teachers and students--is to model activities and then, as a group, analyze them. (3) Combining composition and journalism theory and pedagogy improves critical reading and writing skills and indirectly enhances AP essay performances of high

school students. (4) The concept of intensive journalistic writing can work in stand-alone courses or in literature courses. (5) Much can be accomplished by incorporating journalistic writing skills into literature and writing courses, no matter how many levies fail, how few resources are available or how zonked on MTV are our students. (6) Our working together will produce new ideas for all participants, including the coordinators.

To demonstrate how workshop activities reflected our beliefs about writing and the teaching of writing, I am structuring the remainder of my discussion around the first three of the six beliefs that I listed above.

Belief #1. Teachers of journalism--like all teachers of language arts--need to write. To make this point from the outset (and to help us plan the two weeks), in the spring of 1991 we sent three letters to the participants, the first two asking them to write a short essay in answer to a question. The first letter, welcoming candidates to the program, asked them to describe who they thought was the most significant journalist in our culture today. The second letter asked them to assess what media, other than MTV, their students respond to. The third letter asked them to prepare to discuss their favorite classroom exercises at the institute.

The results of this correspondence were very revealing. In most of the answers to the first question, the teachers made value judgments in interpreting the word "significant." They measured significance in terms of excellence or power. This may sound like a subtle point, but a goal for the first day of the institute was to demonstrate the importance of teaching distinctions between value judgments (or looking only at socially-approved media) and critical perceptions (or an ability to describe dispassionately any and all media). Value judgments are not critical thinking, but mere taste assessments, we wanted to remind the teachers.

The reponses to the second letter, which also produced some surprises, fell into two groups: those who answered the questions by surveying their students and those who offered their own opinions instead. This pattern tied in conveniently with problems we intended to raise about audience research. Of those who surveyed their students, almost all reported being surprised at the variety and diversity of media their students used. We should not have been surprised, of course, since audiences are always complex. We think this exercise raised the teachers' estimation of their own students, which helped them accept more enthusiastically the teaching strategies we gave them later. We wanted them to demand a great deal from their students, and the pre-institute surveys helped participants believe their students could handle the challenge.

Although we wrote every morning and afternoon-- and sometimes at night--I will describe here only four of the writing assignments. My favorite assignment: Watch a TV newscast in a public area, such as a bar or the student union. Watch the people watching the news. To open the morning's discussion of form, the participants freewrote about what had happended in the bar the night before. We discussed how medium, the writer's purposes, the desired effects on the readers, structure preferences, and subject matter combined to dictate "form." Next, we analyzed form in one of the magazines each of us had purchased for several of the workshop exercises, and we revised our essays into forms appropriate for the magazine. We then read parts of both essays aloud, noting the frustrations of form restrictions, basic to journalism, but unnoticeable in freewriting. An interesting--and surprising--outcome of this exercise was our realization that <u>some</u> frustration is good for developing students' critical skills.

A second assignment demonstrated the use of conceptual frames to guide research. In a small garden on campus, Patricia gave us slips of paper with different "concepts"

printed on them, for instance, "blue," "music," "noise,", "motion," "another person's point of view." With our "term" as a frame, we each wrote a short description of the garden, then compared the "facts" that each conceptual frame had elicited or failed to elicit.

A third assignment: Having read a chapter about authority base from Patricia's forthcoming Longman book entitled A Guide to Writing and Editing Magazine Non-fiction, we reworked the authority base of an article from one of our magazines. We read our before and after samples aloud and discussed how changing the ways in which attributions are handled changes the degree of credibility.

Belief #2. The *methods* of teaching journalistic concepts are as important as the concepts themselves, and the best way to change classroom attitudes and behaviors--of both teachers and students--is to model activities and then, as a group, analyze them. The last half hour of each day was spent reviewing the journalistic concepts and the pedagogical activities that had been introduced that day. First, small groups made two columns of notes, on one side "journalism," on the other, "teaching methods." Recorders from each group put the lists on the board, and we negotiated what had and had not been accomplished that day. Repeatedly, the hardest part of this regular closing activity was for participants to raise to the conscious level those procedures modeled throughout the day.

One benefit of having a practicing journalist as a co-director is that Patricia could demonstrate her writing process. (She also served as an interviewee for our interview-of-a-published-writer assignment.) During our segment on reporting skills, Patricia took us on a library tour--the library as seen by a writer, or how to use serendipity and market research for background and prewriting. We followed her as she

replicated her search for information about raspberry tortes!

Belief #3. Combining composition and journalism theory and pedagogy improves critical reading and writing skills. Participants were asked to buy--we had established an account at a nearby bookstore--two magazines, one they liked, one they didn't like. Their writing assignment, to explain each editor's theory of the headline, was the basis of a discussion about how techniques of journalistic content, such as reading for headlines or leads, can be used to encourage close reading to, for instance, analyze audience.

A final assignment to make my point: An English Department colleague demonstrated how to use groups to encourage stronger reading skills. Using Ken Bruffee's strategy of descriptive outlining, small groups outlined a review of "Thelma and Louise." To reach a consensus about the review's message, we compared and defended our interpretations of the review.

There can be no conclusion to this description of our two-week workshop because Patricia and I are still receiving copies of revisions of revisions of course syllabi from the teachers who participated in the workshop. However, by way of conclusion, it is worth reiterating Patricia's journalistic goal for the workshop--to redefine journalism so it is appropriate to English classes and is no longer limited to publishing newspapers and yearbooks; my goal of introducing to journalism teachers some pedagogical strategies successful in composition classes; and our mutual goal of demonstrating that journalistic writing techniques and composition pedaggoy can enhance critical thinking skills.